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Requirements for Cooked Uncured Meat Products

Pathogen Reduction

The Food Safety and Inspection Service is the Agency in the U.S. Department of Agriculture responsible for ensuring that meat and poultry products are safe and wholesome. As part of that responsibility, on August 2, 1993, the Agency published a regulation designed to protect the public health by reducing the risk of foodborne illness from certain types of meat products prepared in USDA-inspected plants. The rule, effective on September 2, 1993, sets heating, cooking, cooling, handling and storage requirements for processing plants that make cooked, partially-cooked or char-marked ground meat products such as hamburgers, Salisbury steaks, breaded chopped veal steaks, and beef and pork sausage patties. (The products governed by the rule are packaged primarily for restaurants, hotels and other institutional kitchens, but also are sold in smaller packages for household consumers.)

The new regulations help carry out the increased emphasis on pathogen reduction directed by Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy as a result of the tragic outbreak of foodborne illness in January 1993. Caused by *E. coli* O157:H7 and linked to hamburgers undercooked in fast-food restaurants, the outbreak included several hundred confirmed cases and four deaths in Washington, Idaho, California and Nevada. As a result of the outbreak, in the winter of 1993 FSIS intensified its effort against *E. coli* O157:H7 and other pathogens to develop added controls and new ways to strengthen public health protection against microbial pathogens. The publication of the regulations described in this background paper is one step in the Agency's multi-pronged Pathogen Reduction Program. That program seeks to reduce pathogens throughout the food chain—from the farm, to the slaughter plant and the processing plant, throughout distribution, to awareness of food safety in the kitchen and even to the consumer's fork.

Background

On December 27, 1988, FSIS issued a proposed rule to control bacteria in heat-treated products such as fully and partially cooked patties and to mandate cooking instructions on labels of these products. Comments on that proposal and subsequent information resulted in a number of changes and led to withdrawal of that proposal. Another proposal was issued in June 1990. In developing the final regulations, FSIS considered the 24 comments it received on the second proposal and experience and knowledge gained in recent months.

Temperature Requirements

To control bacterial growth in heat-processed, uncured meat products such as patties, hamburgers and chopped steaks, the rule sets temperature requirements for fully cooked, partially cooked and char-marked products and requires plant employees to measure the temperature of at least one product from each production line every hour. The temperature must be measured at the center of the product using a device that is accurate to within 1 degree F.

To assure that a fully cooked, uncured product is thoroughly heated, its center must reach a sufficiently high temperature and be held at that temperature for a long enough time to destroy any pathogenic bacteria that may be present. The rule includes a selection of safe time and temperature combinations for fully cooked patties and other uncured products. For example, for patties cooked to an internal temperature of 157 degrees F, the holding time is 10 seconds but for patties reaching 155 degrees F, the holding time is 16 seconds.

Under the rule, partially cooked products must be heated to at least 140 degrees F at the center. To control bacterial growth when heat is used to make char-marks on uncooked products, the regulations require that the internal temperature of char-marked patties can reach no more than 70 degrees F.

Cooling Requirements

Because bacteria grow rapidly at room temperatures, the products must be cooled to an internal temperature of 40 degrees F or colder within two hours. Rapid and even cooling is necessary to prevent recontamination of cooked products or growth of bacteria in partially cooked products.

Labeling Requirements

The USDA rule also requires that packages of partially cooked or char-marked uncured meats be clearly labeled with cooking instructions for food preparers in the home and in restaurants, schools, and other institutional kitchens. Labeling requirements in the new rule are necessary because some uncured meat products may appear ready-to-eat even though they are not fully cooked.

Under the rule, labels for products such as patties, chopped steaks, and hamburgers that are not fully cooked must have instructions, prominently placed next to the product name.

- For partially cooked patties and other uncured meat products in the rule, these words must appear: "Partially cooked: For Safety, Cook Until Well Done (Internal Meat Temperature 160 degrees F)".

- For uncooked products char-marked by heat process, these words must appear: "Un-cooked, Char-marked: For Safety, Cook Until Well Done (Internal Meat Temperature 160 degrees F)".

These labeling statements must appear adjacent to the product name, in lettering of easily readable style and at least one-half the size of the largest letter in the product name. On a temporary basis, to supplement existing labels, pressure sensitive "stickers" may be used to label the products with the required cooking instructions. Under the rule, plants must apply the instructions.

Requirements to Prevent Cross- Contamination

It is important to prevent bacteria that may be present on raw products from cross-contaminating fully-cooked products. That is why the rule requires that fully cooked patties and other products be handled in areas apart from areas where raw meat or product that is less than fully cooked is handled. The rule requires that the handling areas be either physically separated by solid, floor-to-ceiling walls or that finished product be handled at different times after thorough cleaning and sanitizing of the handling area. Requirements for preventing cross contamination include:

- Work surface, machines, and tools must be cleaned with a sanitizer germicidally equivalent to 50 parts per million (ppm) chlorine.
- Employees shall wash and sanitize their hands whenever they enter the fully-cooked product area or before handling unpackaged, fully cooked products. They must also sanitize their hands whenever they become contaminated during plant operations. The hand sanitizer shall be germicidally equivalent to 50 ppm chlorine.
- Clean outer garments such as aprons, smocks, and gloves shall be identified and used only in the fully-cooked area.
- Fully-cooked products stored in the same room with other product shall first be packaged or covered.
- Fully cooked, partially cooked and char-marked products must be stored at refrigeration temperatures, 40 degrees F or cooler.

The new rule, which amends the Code of Federal Regulations (9 CFR Parts 318 and 320), is published in the August 2, 1993, *Federal Register*. The regulation governs plants shipping heat-processed meat products in interstate commerce. It also will apply to meat plants that prepare products for within-state distribution under individual state inspection programs. For this rule, FSIS and Food and Drug Administration officials in the Department of Health and Human Services are working together, as is customary, to see that safe handling practices are also followed in supermarket, hotel, restaurant and other institutional kitchens throughout the country.

In addition to regulatory controls, FSIS also has extensive consumer education programs to teach safe food handling practices. For food handling advice, consumers can speak to FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline specialists from 10 am to 4 pm Eastern Time or listen to pre-recorded messages by calling 1-800-535-4555 or (202) 720-3333 in the Washington, D.C., area.

For additional information please phone:

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